ABSTRACT

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GOODBYE, UNCLE TOM; SO LONG, SUPERFLY: CHARACTER TYPES OF AFRAMERICAN MEN IN THE FILMS OF SPIKE LEE

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This thesis discusses images of Aframerican men in Spike Lee's films, She's Gotta Have It, School Daze, Do the Right Thing, Mo' Better Blues, Jungle Fever, and X. In this study, Aframerican male characters in Lee's works have been compared to stereotypes perpetuated in American films.

Lee depicts Aframerican men in various roles in his films. These characterizations range from love-starved fools, angry urban dwellers, responsible fathers, neighborhood drunks, preachers, musicians and hustlers, to middle-class workers, and political activists. However, Lee's depictions of Aframerican males do not fall into the dehumanizing tradition of mainstream Hollywood movie-makers. His films connect Aframerican men with women, families, and communities. Since Lee's images of Aframerican men are so diverse, and so far removed from popular stereotypes, this thesis examines these roles in the context of American filmography.

# GOODBYE, UNCLE TOM; SO LONG, SUPERFLY: CHARACTER TYPES OF AFRAMERICAN MEN IN THE FILMS OF SPIKE LEE

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I dedicate this work to my mother, Ola M. Kelly, to my father, Wesley Kelly, and to my family. I am grateful to them for encouraging and for supporting me in all my endeavors. Also, I am especially thankful to Amanda J. Lee for her invaluable technical skills, and to those other persons, too numerous to be named, whose kind words, advice, and foresight kept me motivated throughout this project.

## PREFACE

Mass media have become a dominant means of communicating ideas and information in American society. Today, audiences have access to films at movie theaters, through videocassette, cable television, and sometimes commercial and public television networks. Aframerican[1] men have traditionally been dehumanized, humiliated, and misrepresented in America's "mad" medium--film. Therefore, this thesis examines derogatory stereotypes of Aframerican men in American films, and in films by Spike Lee.

This study is based primarily on Lee's films, the companion books, which include scripts and pre-production notes, and interviews.[2] Secondary sources include historical film criticism, film dictionaries, literary dictionaries, scholarly journals, and other critical sources about Aframericans in films, and about Lee. Finally, the conclusions on Aframerican manhood in this study reflect the opinion that "Much of the current Black studies have focused on either the Black family, Black women, Afrika, the Black

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[1]In this work, the term "Aframerican" refers to people of African descent in the Americas, and replaces the terms Black, Afro-American, African American, and Negro. An earlier use of "Aframerican" appeared during the Harlem Renaissance (Potamkin 1928, 107).

[2]Lee's film Jungle Fever does not have a companion book or a published script. Therefore, direct quotes were taken from the film. In addition, because of tendencies to ad lib, in some examples, direct quotes have been taken from Lee's other films. These citations are noted with Lee's last name, followed by the year of the film's release.

homosexual community or Europe's and America's influence on the Black world" (Madhubuti 1990, 60).

The study employs three approaches: A general overview of Lee's Aframerican male characters; use of critical sources to assess the roles of Aframerican men in American film history and the origins of these roles. In quoted materials, the letter "b" has been capitalized, where the writers use the lower-case form, in references to Aframericans. Likewise, the letter "w" has been capitalized in references to Euramericans;[3] and the study uses technical sources to ensure the study focuses on Lee's films as art.

Spike Lee humanizes and "re-sexes" images of Aframerican men in his films. These characters embody aspects of Aframerican masculinity that many mainstream filmmakers usually ignore or de-emphasize in their films. Lee's images are realistic portraits of Aframerican male experiences. Not all of Lee's images are positive, but they are not degrading fabrications of a (non-Aframerican) spectator's imagination.

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[3]In this work, the term "Euramerican" replaces the terms White, Caucasian, and European American.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE PORTRAYAL OF THE AFRAMERICAN MAN IN AMERICAN FILMS

In the history of American film, Aframerican men appear in limited settings on American movie screens. Living happily as slaves on southern plantations, performing antics, singing, dancing, playing instruments, committing crimes, and fighting in American wars are among the most common roles in which they appear. In a 1933 issue of The Journal of Negro Education, Sterling A. Brown writes about "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors." Similar to Daniel Leab's conclusion that "The Black image on screen has always lacked the dimension of humanity" (Leab 1975, 5), Brown characterizes literary stereotypes:

> These stereotypes are marked either by exaggeration or omissions; . . . [and] they all illustrate dangerous specious generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view (Brown 1933, 180).

Likewise, historian John Blassingame says:

> Since so much of one's personality is socially non-perceivable, hidden or invisible, the way other people describe an individual is not totally reliable as an index of his attitudes and behavior (Blassingame 1972, 135).

From the early nineteenth century to the present, images of Aframerican men on stage, in films, and in film criticism substantiate these conclusions.

Blackface minstrelsy is one of the early forms of American entertainment to distort images of Aframerican men.

This form took shape during the plantation era and continues to influence numerous Aframerican images (Bogle 1989, 25; Thompson 1975, 54). "In minstrel performances, blackface bondsmen were loyally imitative and greatly dependent on their masters. Such intellectually inferior clowns posed little threat to White hegemony" (Dates and Barlow 1975, 7). Daniel Leab aptly describes the impact of the blackface tradition, when he discusses the influence of the minstrel shows and vaudeville on American films:

> Already well-established before the Civil War, they succeeded in fixing the Black man in the American consciousness as a ludicrous figure supposedly born, as one show business history puts it, "hoofing on the levee to the strumming of banjos." He was prone to frenzied dancing, shiftlessness, garish dress, gin tippling, dice shooting, torturing the language, and, inevitably, was addicted to watermelon and chicken, usually stolen (Leab 1975, 8).

Even when Aframerican actors performed in blackface, the stereotypes continued (Bogle 1989, 25; Leab 1975, 8; Toll 1974, 196).

Two images of Aframericans characterize the antebellum period, when literature and stage performances dominated popular culture. Proslavery advocates would depict images of contented and comic Aframericans living on plantations. Liberal abolitionists would promote their cause with images of enslaved Aframericans as victims of inhumane treatment on plantations. Both groups seem to have been content with Aframericans living in bondage, and "waiting patiently to be set free by righteous White emancipators" (Dates and Barlow

1975, 10). Moreover, Gary Null identifies stereotypical images of Aframerican men in film as:

> the foolish and irresponsible citizen, the grinning bellhop or flapjack cook, . . . the song and dance man, the devoted servant or contented slave, the barefoot watermelon eater, the corrupt politician, the hardened criminal, and the African savage (Null 1975, 8).

Unfortunately, many of these fabrications remain fixed in American films to date, with comparatively few exceptions.

Aframerican film characters, from the 1890s to 1915, have been described as: "A composite of qualities that were the opposite of the values treasured by White American society" (Leab 1975, 20). D. W. Griffith is often noted for his cinematography and derogatory images of Aframericans in his The Birth of a Nation (1915). Donald Bogle says this filmmaker "presented all the types with such force and power that his film touched off a wave of controversy and was denounced as the most slanderous anti-Negro movie ever released" (Bogle 1989, 10). Also, in comments about Aframericans in film reviews, Thomas Cripps says:

> From 1915 to 1920 roughly half the Negro roles reviewed in Variety were maids and butlers, and 74 percent of them were known in the credits by some demeaning first name (Cripps 1977, 112).

Furthermore, in a discription of servant characters in the 1930s, Langston Hughes outlines a customary direction for the Aframerican actor:

> Upon opening the car door for one's White employer in any film, the director would command, "Jump to the ground. . . . Remove cap. . . . Open again. . . . Step back and bow. . . . Come up

> smiling. . . . Now bow again. . . . Now straighten up and grin!" (Bogle 1989, 37).

Nevertheless, in a discussion on racism and Aframerican males, Alvin Poussaint provides some insight on the oppressive attitude Hughes illustrates:

> Under racism, any potential Black male aggressor had to be controlled. Thus, much of the racial etiquette of docility in its extreme was reserved for the Black male. In fact, Black males were made to assume what has been described as the "feminine" role which meant they were to be passive, dependent and non-assertive. In other words, they were to behave like boys, not men (Poussaint 1979, 54).

Bogle concludes that not until "Melvin Van Peebles' Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song (1971) appeared did sexually assertive Black males make their way back to the screen" (Bogle 1989, 16). A host of Aframerican "buck" characters (i.e., violent and sexually irresponsible (Bogle 1989, 13)) followed, in the "Blaxploitation Era." The period (1970s) produced films like Shaft (1971), Super Fly (1972), Slaughter (1972) and others, all written, produced and otherwise controlled by Euramericans, primarily to exploit Aframerican audiences. (Bogle 1989, 16-17, 241-242; Murray 1973, 63; Leab 1975, 262). These buck characters are usually over-sexed, violent, pimps, or connected, in some way, to criminal activity (Bogle 1989, 242). In a recent interview, director, comedian and actor, Robert Townsend comments on the lack of positive Aframerican male images in current films: "I look at kids growing up and I think, 'What do they have to go and see that has images of them that are positive?' And there's

nothing" (Childs 1993, 62).

# PART I. IMAGES

## CHAPTER 2

## A REVIEW OF SPIKE LEE'S FILMOGRAPHY

Spike Lee creates films that deal with many issues Aframericans confront in American society. His films reveal the personal, social and political challenges of urban Aframerica. Through his portrayal of realistic images of Aframerican life, Lee challenges the distortions of stereotypical images that conventional Hollywood filmmakers create. One critic describes Lee's films as: "Radically different from the usual Hollywood world of African-Americans" (Nelson 1990, 109). The following is a general discussion about images of Aframerican men in Lee's six feature films.

Lee's first independent feature film, She's Gotta Have It, appeared in 1986. It won him the "Prix de la Jeunesse" award at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival, and a "Clarence Muse Youth Award" from the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. School Daze appeared in 1988. Do The Right Thing followed in 1989, Mo' Better Blues in 1990, and Jungle Fever in 1991. Finally, with support from several prominent Aframericans, Lee presented X in 1992.

Lee portrays the emotional upsets of unrequited love, the centuries-long crisis of racial discrimination against, and within, the Aframerican community, and he celebrates the Aframerican Jazz heritage. He depicts real-life experiences of Aframericans in American society. Moreover, Lee's

Aframerican male perspective helps to renovate images of Aframerican men, their struggles, their defeats, and their triumphs, on American movie screens.

Lee is clear about his intentions to be fair in his depictions of Aframerican men. He adamantly states: "I have no hate for Black men" (Lee 1987, 56). He supports this with images of Aframerican men and women who love, protest, and progress in America. Commenting on a scene about Aframerican masculinity in his sketch for a television comedy show, Saturday Night Live, Lee says: "That was a play against the whole misperception that all young Black males are animals, rapists, muggers. I'm tired of it" (Lee 1987, 53). Likewise, sociologist Robert Staples also describes the Aframerican male image in popular culture as:

> the sexual superstud, the athlete, and the rapacious criminal. That is how he is perceived in the public consciousness, interpreted in the dominant media and ultimately how he comes to see and internalize his own role. Rarely are we exposed to his more prosaic role as worker, husband, father and American citizen (Staples 1982, 1).

Hollywood's tradition of dehumanizing Aframerican males justifies Lee's angry tone, and Staple's observation.

She's Gotta Have It is Lee's signature work which brought him national recognition as an independent filmmaker. Aframerican males in She's Gotta Have It do not rely on degrading antics or other stereotypical guises, to keep the viewer's attention. In this film, Lee's Aframerican male characters have varied and believable personality traits.

In She's Gotta Have It, three men woo the female protagonist, Nola, until she finally rejects them all. Lee says "Mars is to humor her, Greer is the physical thing and Jamie is Mr. Stable" (Lee 1987, 44). Although the plot revolves around Nola and her love affairs, all of the male characters are sexual and realistic. In a comparison to Steven Spielberg's film version of Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1985), Lee says:

> Even though there are some dog Black men in this film, you can tell there is a difference. This film was not done with hate, and none of the men here are one-note animals, like Mister (Rohter 1986, 18).

In addition, Bogle concludes that Lee satirizes the "vanities, follies, pretensions, and insecurities" of the male characters in She's Gotta Have It (Bogle 1989, 299). In this film, Lee depicts authentic characterizations of Aframerican men. For example, the character Mars dresses in style with a contemporary Aframerican fashion trend. "Mars wears Cazals designer glasses and sports a Caesar (short hair-cut) with a part on the side" (Lee 1987, 290). He also wears a gold chain with a gold medallion that spells out "Mars" in capital letters.

Besides Mars' gaudy wardrobe, other realistic Aframerican characters appear, like Greer who is egotistical and ambitious, and Jamie who is a romantic. These major characters are a part of the sexual theme that permeates She's Gotta Have It. They are examples of Aframerican men as

something other than the brute and over-sexed stereotypes created by early Euramerican filmmakers, like D. W. Griffith in The Birth of a Nation. Bogle says:

> Many of Hollywood's hang-ups and hesitations in presenting sensual Black men on screen resulted, in part, from the reactions to the Griffith spectacle. So strong was his presentation, and so controversial its reception, that movie companies ignored and avoided such a type of Black character for fear of raising new hostilities (Bogle 1989, 16).

Lee defies Hollywood's previous reservations about sensual Aframerican men. The three male characters in She's Gotta Have It are inseparable from sexual activity. Moreover, they all have direct or implied sexual relationships with other women, in addition to Nola.

Lee attempts to send a "wake-up call" to the Aframerican community with his second film, School Daze. This work depicts the internal ethnic conflicts between "light" and "dark" skinned Aframericans, the educated few and the uneducated masses, and protest versus accommodation. Lee points out:

> It's an internal problem. White people put it on us way back, but we perpetuate it. The blame for a lot of this belongs to Black men because light skin and long hair is their ideal of beauty (Allen 1988, 130).

These distortions are the superficial class distinctions Lee explores in the film. In a note to the script of School Daze, for example, Lee distinguishes the light-skinned and dark-skinned characters as "Wannabees" and "Jigaboos," respectively. He says,

> The student body is divided into two factions: the Haves and the Have-Nots. This division is based upon class and color. The Haves, the affluent students at Mission, are all with light skin, "good hair," blue or green eyes, and so forth. While across the tracks are the Have-Nots. They are dark, have kinky nappy hair, and many of them are the first members of their families to ever get a college education; in other words, the Black underclass. Each faction has a name for the other. It's the WANNABEES VS. THE JIGS!!! Wanna Be White and Jigaboos. Remember, its about class and color (Lee and Jones 1988, 185).

Thus, the working-class groups (Jigaboos) Da Naturals and Da Fellas; the elitist (Wannabees) Gamma Rays and Gamma Phi Gamma; and the "local yokels" (Aframerican men from the local community) are the rival groups in School Daze. They represent the ongoing conflict that ultimately unifies the theme of "uplifting the race" in School Daze which also has an anti-Apartheid subplot.

In this film, Aframerican male characters (Da Fellas) take on socio-political roles, as they publicly denounce the fictive Mission College's investments in the Apartheid government of South Africa. They are countered by the politically naive Julian/Big Brother Almighty, and the tom behavior of Cedar Cloud, Chairman of the board of trustees. In addition, Leeds, one of the "local yokels," challenges their Aframerican allegiance when he asks Dap: "Are you Black?" (Lee and Jones 1988, 276). This attack is insulting to the politically astute Dap, especially since in the previous scene Da Fellas taunt him about his political diligence with the comments: "Lighten up, Marcus Garvey";

"Preach Jesse"; "Chill, Farrakhan"; and "Teach, Malcolm" (Lee 1988). Moreover, one review says that School Daze

> attempts to raise the consciousness of Blacks to get beyond unnecessary barriers which keep us from uniting. However, if a person is not open to thinking about and understanding these issues, then, perhaps, he or she will leave the theater gaining nothing (Jackson 1988, 13-14).

With the Aframerican male characters in School Daze, Lee illustrates the uselessness of intraethnic strife, and the ignorance born from miseducation within the Aframerican community.

Lee's "wake-up call" in School Daze echoes the message of the 1920's Harlem Renaissance, and the "Black Power" and "Black Arts" movements of the 1960's. These eras proclaim pride in their African roots and their Aframerican heritage. The popular saying "I'm Black and I'm proud" is an implication of these socio-political movements. Thus, Lee's depiction of the effects of Aframericans not internalizing the messages from those movements suggests that there should be more focus on unification, and less on class consciousness.

The finale of School Daze supports this conclusion. After Dap rings the school bell, he shouts: "Wake up! Wake up!" (Lee 1988), and the student body assembles in front of the administration building. Lee describes them as a diverse and cohesive group, and "not different factions of Black people determined by class or color, hair texture, accent, education or physical features, but one unified people" (Lee and Jones 1988, 327). However, the only group missing is the

"local yokels." Nevertheless, this final scene is hopeful, through its attempt to be diverse.

Do The Right Thing is one of Lee's more political films. Once again, he draws from real life. The murder of a young Aframerican man in the Howard Beach community of New York is Lee's impetus for Do The Right Thing. However, Lee includes only four elements from the Howard Beach murder: "First, the Black-Italian-American conflict; second, a pizzeria setting; third, a baseball bat; and fourth, a Black person who dies at the hands of Whites" (Lee 1989b, 56). The plot unfolds in one excruciatingly hot and humid day in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of New York. Lee uses a heat leitmotif to show the characters reacting to the irritating heat and losing control of their tempers, until someone commits a murder.

The killing of the Aframerican male character, Radio Raheem, exposes the bigotry in the Bedford-Stuyvesant community and, indeed, American society. Lee says "Radio Raheem is the misunderstood Black youth. White people cross the street when they see him coming" (Lee and Jones 1989, 59). Also, as his name suggests, Radio Raheem is inseparable from the large cassette-radio he carries throughout the film. Nelson George says:

> People with a mainstream (or middle-class or White) outlook view young Aframericans with ghetto blasters as public nuisances whose presence challenges society's standards (George 1991, 79).

However, Lee humanizes this misunderstood Aframerican male type.

Lee also attributes political consciousness and resistance to some of the other Aframerican male characters (e.g., Buggin' Out, Smiley, Mookie, and The Corner Men). By the film's end, Lee succeeds in characterizing Aframerican men beyond the typical non-threatening and "acceptable" (Bogle 1989, 4) Aframerican male images in American films. Examples of "acceptable" character types include the docile, lazy, and criminal images in the many versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin; the coon (i.e., "Negro as amusement object" (Bogle 1989, 7)) characters played by Stepin Fetchit in Hearts in Dixie (1929) and Judge Priest (1934); and the roles of Sidney Poitier in A Patch of Blue (1965) and Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967).

Lee's fourth production, Mo' Better Blues, follows the personal triumphs and failures of the musician protagonist, Bleek Gilliam. However, Bogle says:

> American films have rarely had any place for Black jazz artists, other than on the sidelines. . . . The artists were brought on as specialty or novelty acts. They might perform a number or two, then disappear (Bogle 1990, 16).

Mo' Better Blues begins and ends with an image of an Aframerican family which includes a mother, a child, and a father. The film does not show much of Bleek's childhood, but it does identify some important relationships and experiences of his boyhood. For example, young Bleek is the product of a two-parent family, in which his mother, Lillian, insists that he practice the trumpet, instead of playing baseball with his friends. Bleek's father, Big Shot, impatiently agrees with

her. Lee reassigns these roles near the films end. Bleek becomes a father in a two-parent family, but when his wife, Indigo, insists that their son, Miles, practice music instead of playing baseball, Bleek says "Let the boy have some fun" (Lee 1990, 284). Bleek's comment is reflective of his childhood disadvantages, because of music, but Bleek's boyhood experiences are only seen by the audience in the opening scene.

Moreover, Mo' Better Blues does not center around the family unit, per se, but on the protagonist's dilemma between his devotion to his trumpet, his love for two women and eventually, his triumph over personal defeats. Lee says, "This is a film about relationships--Bleek's relationships with his manager, his father, his band, his two women friends, and his music" (Lee and Jones 1990, 42). In addition, other Aframerican male characters in the film appear as fathers, sons, comrades, rivals, brutes, and lovers of Aframerican women, and the musicians do not conveniently appear as mere entertainment, to offset a boring plot.

Lee's fifth production, Jungle Fever, presents the subject of interethnic relationships. One may describe Jungle Fever as a manipulation of the interethnic theme, in contrast to Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967), since Lee does not present a desexed relationship. In the latter, Aframerican actor Sidney Poitier plays a rather emasculated medical school graduate who goes to have dinner with the parents of his

Euramerican fiancee. Bogle observes: "Never is the couple seen in a sexy, passionate embrace. About the most we get is a glimpse of them kissing briefly . . . , seen through the rear-view mirror of a taxi cab" (Bogle 1988, 101). However, in Jungle Fever, Flipper and his Italian American secretary, Angie, are shown from at least ten different camera shots, in a passionate sex scene on top of his desk, at the architectural firm where they work.

In another contrast, the title Guess Who's Coming to Dinner refers to Poitier's character as a surprise visitor. The title Jungle Fever suggests a physical or emotional condition. It implies that Flipper and Angie suffer from an illness.

Although the plot of Jungle Fever deals with some of the tragedies of interethnic affairs and their impact on the Aframerican woman, this film succeeds in sexualizing Aframerican male characters, and connecting them to familial and other settings. The four major Aframerican male characters, for example, are paired with female counterparts. Similarly, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comments:

> Lee deftly establishes the economic foundation of racism, on which White Western xenophobia has constructed an entire metaphysics of Black sexuality, by reversing our normal expectations of the distribution of class status, educational background, and financial stability among the film's Black and White characters (Gates 1991, 164).

Besides Gator, the drug addicted character, Lee also connects the Aframerican male characters to education, middle-class

professions, and religion.

The combination of the naive Aframerican male characters in She's Gotta Have It, the politically astute characters in School Daze and Do The Right Thing, and the interpersonal and social dilemmas of the characters in Mo' Better Blues and Jungle Fever make the evolving characterization of Malcolm X, in Lee's latest film, X, a logical addition to his current film repertoire.

Based on The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley (1965), the power of X is in the evolution of the protagonist, Malcolm, from a street hustler and convict, to a renowned minister for the Nation of Islam. Haki Madhubuti's impression of the real Malcolm X suggests the potential impact of this characterization:

> The short life of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz is without parallel in Afrikan American struggle. His impact is immeasurable, his message undying, his integrity legendary, his commitment unquestioned and his significance and contribution are still growing (Madhubuti 1990, 252).

The actor who portrays Malcolm in X, Denzel Washington, says his desire in the role of Malcolm is "to show the spiritual, political and philosophical evolution of a man" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 116-117).

To date, these are the six feature films by Lee. In each, Lee's Aframerican male images are definitively inspired by the Aframerican community. These films also function, in some way, to liberate the conscience of Aframerica, and for the most part, they directly oppose the stereotypical and

dehumanized images that usually appear before many American audiences. As such, Lee's films do not portray distortions; they reflect authentic Aframerican experiences. In contributing to the limited depictions of positive Aframerican images, Lee has his shortcomings. However, Lee's intent does not appear to be unscrupulous or intentionally harmful. In short, his Aframerican male characters are mutations of traditional character types, because they include a variety of qualities that American films commonly ignore.

# CHAPTER 3

## NEW IMAGES FOR A NEW AGE: CONTEMPORARY CHARACTER TYPES OF AFRAMERICAN MEN IN FILM

This chapter introduces character types such as "tom-buck," "lost-man," and "race-man," to the present list of characterizations in American films. These descriptive terms represent a combination of the stereotypes of Aframerican men in American films, with contemporary examples from Lee's films. Moreover, critical, social, and psychological commentaries from expert Aframerican scholars, sociologists, and psychiatrists are included in this discussion, to enhance the visual and literal interpretations of these new (and the old) character types.

Images of Aframerican men in films are part of a tradition of stereotyping. These character types are exaggerations by Euramerican filmmakers and directors which cater to Euramerican audiences. In Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks, Bogle describes the practice of distorting Aframerican images in film: "To entertain by stressing Negro inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey" (Bogle 1989, 4). In addition, Poussaint concludes that Euramerican men fear aggressive or sexual Aframerican men. Thus: "The image of the oppressed Black with shoulders and head bent over, shuffling, and scratching his head is strictly a Black male image" (Poussaint 1979, 54). Over the years,

however, film images of Aframerican men seem to fluctuate from docile servants and ignorant or absentminded lackeys, to violent, and out of control brutes. These have been part of the tradition of dehumanizing and emasculating Aframerican men in American films.

The tom stereotype is an early example of Aframerican men as emasculated character types. The classic tom was denied full participation in manhood, because his actions on screen were often limited to performing some service, dancing, or entertaining (Toll 1974, 93; Bogle 1989, 5-6). He seems to have had neither opportunity, nor interest in sexual indulgences. In a description of the tom stereotype, Bogle says:

> Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their White massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind (Bogle 1989, 4-6).

Although Sam Lucas "was the first Black man to star in this role in Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1915) (Toll 1974, 218), Uncle Billy in The Littlest Rebel (1935) is a later example of the classic tom. Furthermore, the tom character would not appear with a wife, his own children, or even a love interest.

Fortunately, for Aframerican male characters and Aframerican film audiences, some Aframerican filmmakers attempt to symbolically retrieve Aframerican manhood in their films with realistic depictions. These filmmakers tend to portray a variety of Aframerican male

images, and do not create emasculated characters to suit the social expectations of some traditional audiences. This has come through portrayals of Aframerican men as husbands, fathers, educated professionals, and lovers of Aframerican and Euramerican women. Along with some of his contemporaries and predecessors, Lee depicts Aframerican men confronting contemporary conflicts, such as drug abuse, job discrimination, police brutality, and intraethnic discrimination. Yet, Lee renovates some images of Aframerican men, and furnishes examples of the character types this study introduces.

## Tom-Buck

In this study, the "tom-buck" character type represents a combination of the docile tom characters from the silent film era, and the buck characters in D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation. The tom characterization has been described as "the faithful retainer," (Nesteby 1982, 16), and "the contented slave" (Brown 1933, 180). In addition, Bogle describes the buck stereotype as "big, baadddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied" (Bogle 1989, 13). Unlike the emasculated tom and the over-sexed buck, educated men, fathers, and husbands fall under the tom-buck character type. Their inclusion counters the "sexual stud" and the absentee father images that reoccur in Aframerican male characterizations. Besides being faithful servants, tom-bucks

are also distinguishable by unmeaningful or lustful sexual liaisons with women. This characterization is contrary to the traditional tom and buck types. They are not necessarily emasculated like classic tom, and they sometimes have consenting sexual relationships with Euramerican women. They may also perpetrate violence against other Aframericans. All of these characteristics help to identify the tom-buck images found in Lee's films. This character type appears in at least two of his films, and in each, the tom-buck characters appear in pairs.

Madlock and Rod are an obvious tom-buck duo in Lee's Mo' Better Blues. They work as bullies for Petey, a Euramerican bookie, to whom Giant owes money. Petey instructs these brutal tom-bucks to "take care of" Giant for not paying a gambling debt (Lee 1990). The first time, they trip Giant off of his bike with their car door. They abduct him and break his left hand. The next time, they prey on him in the men's bathroom at a nightclub ("Beneath The Underground"). When they emerge from the bathroom stalls, they taunt the lone Giant: "We don't believe in killing our brothers and sisters, but you're definitely gonna be hurt," says Madlock (Lee and Jones 1990, 276). Afterwards, they brutally beat Giant in the alley.

In the alley fight scene, Madlock holds Giant from behind, while Rod beats him. The fact that they wear smiles, laugh, and make jokes in the process suggests that they are

"playing a game":

> MADLOCK:
> Oh Yeah. One more of them [hard fist punches to Giant's jaw]. Another one. Okay, a Mike Tyson now. [He and Rod laugh hysterically as Giant falls. They hurl Giant into a mound of garbage]. Get the fuck up! Get up! [In the background Petey is forced back inside the club, when he tries to come out to stop the beating] (Lee 1990).

Madlock and Rod seem to have taken Petey's instructions further than he intends. Here, Madlock and Rod are following Petey's orders, and they assume power and exercise force over Giant. In Visions For Black Men, Na'im Akbar describes stages of development for Aframerican manhood. His model classifies Madlock and Rod's type of behavior as "make-believe power, symbolic authority" (Akbar 1991, 8). They only have "play power," because their actions are prompted by Petey's instructions, and not independently. This assumption of power alludes to their otherwise lack of authority in society, and in their personal lives.

In comments on "counter-racist psychiatry" (or decoding societal symbols), Frances Cress Welsing says: "Submission to and cooperation with victimization and oppression are signs of individual or group mental illness or self-negation" (Welsing 1991, 53). By Welsing's definition, Madlock and Rod are victims and agents of an oppressive power. Moreover, their physical assaults against Giant are characteristic of the tom-buck character type. The tragedy of their actions is that they appear to enjoy performing this corrupt service for Petey. Nevertheless, unlike the classic (pre-emancipation)

tom character, these tom-bucks will receive pay for their "service."

In X, young Malcolm and Shorty are another tom-buck duo. The designation of Malcolm and Shorty as tom-bucks stems from their relations with Euramerican women. In Jungle Fever, the character Reverend Doctor gives an anecdotal description of this historical relationship:

> White man say to his woman: "Baby, you are the flower of White southern womanhood--too holy and pure to be touched by any man, including me. I'm gon' put up on a pedestal, so the whole world can fall down and worship you. And if any nigger so much as look at you, I'll lynch his ass!" . . . But in the midnight hour, lying alone, on the hot bed of lust, I'm sure they thought what it would be like to have one of them big Black bucks their husbands were so desperately afraid of (Lee 1991).

Nevertheless, in X, Malcolm and Shorty's tom-buck characterizations result from their casual sexual liaisons with two Euramerican female characters. These characterizations do not necessarily mimic the emasculated tom and over-sexed buck characters, from earlier representations.

For example, Malcolm meets Sophia at a dance hall. In the script, Lee says "The crowd is predominately [sic] BLACK, although there is a peppering of WHITES, especially White chicks" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 176). In this scene, Malcolm's actions and Lee's narration illustrate a revolutionary sexualizing of an Aframerican male image:

> CLOSE-MALCOLM
> Trying to play it cool--but he is beginning to pant. Not from the dancing, but from the situation: A gorgeous White chick asking for it.
> SOPHIA:

> Why don't you take your little girl home, Red [(Malcolm's nickname)], and come on back? . . . I'll be here when you get back.
> He can only grin.
> . . . . . .
> [Later, in the backseat of Sophia's car] Malcolm mumbles something. He then kisses Sophia as if his Black life depended on it (Lee and Wiley 1992, 179-181).

In these scenes, the viewer sees a sexual Aframerican male with a consenting Euramerican female. This depiction challenges D. W. Griffith's fabrications of Aframerican men which Bogle describes:

> The Black bucks of [The Birth of a Nation] are psychopaths, one always panting and salivating, the other forever stiffening his body as if the mere presence of a White woman in the same room could bring him to a sexual climax (Bogle 1989, 14).

Earlier images of the Aframerican male were desexed, especially after Griffith's brutal buck characters. Bogle says: "Griffith played on the myth of the Negro's high-powered sexuality, then articulated the great White fear that every Black man longs for a White woman" (Bogle 1989, 13-14). In contrast, Lee shows a mutual "psychopathic" reaction in which Sophia and young Malcolm show attraction to each other. Thus, Sophia is also seen "panting and salivating," as if the presence of an Aframerican man could bring her to a sexual climax.

Similar implications arise when Malcolm tries to evade Laura, his original date:

> MALCOLM:
> I better not come in.
> LAURA:
> I ain't stupid.

MALCOLM:
I mean it's late, baby.
LAURA:
I know where you're going.
MALCOLM:
I'm going to bed. I gotta work tomorrow, need my rest. Baby, I'll call you tomorrow.
LAURA:
What for? I ain't White and I don't put out (Lee and Wiley 1992, 179-180).

At this stage, young Malcolm is still operating under what Akbar describes as the "boy" mentality. He says "When your view of women is exclusively of someone to satisfy your various needs, then you are a boy" (Akbar 1991, 9). Laura is willing to commit to young Malcolm. However, he is not willing to do the same for her. Moreover, Laura's resistance, and Malcolm's eagerness to accept Sophia's surrender, support Akbar's conclusion, and create the image of both Malcolm and Sophia "panting and salivating." This is contrary to the usual depiction of an Aframerican man lustfully pursuing a Euramerican woman.

Similarly, Shorty is slave to his carnal desires. He dates Sophia's little sister, Peg. The most revealing scene of Shorty's immaturity, as a tom-buck character, is set twelve years later, when he goes to see Malcolm at a Muslim Temple. Shorty admits to Malcolm: "You is something, Homeboy. My trouble is--I ain't had enough stuff [cocaine] yet, I ain't et all the ribs I want and I sure ain't had enough White tail yet" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 250). Obviously, Shorty's emotional development is arrested in boyhood. He is still allowing vices (cocaine and promiscuity) to influence him and to halt

his entry into manhood. Another significant point of this scene is that it juxtaposes images of an Aframerican boy (Shorty) who is emotionally underdeveloped, with an Aframerican man (Malcolm) who evolves and cultivates his own consciousness.

In these characterizations, not only does Lee reassociate the Aframerican male character with his traditionally ignored sexuality, but Lee goes further and puts him in bed with a Euramerican woman. Also, they counter actor Sidney Poitier's description of the neutralizing of Aframerican male sexuality by Euramerican filmmakers as "institutional": "To think of the American Negro male in romantic social-sexual circumstances is difficult" (Murray 1972, 31). However, Malcolm alludes to this "new" image in X, when he says to Sophia: "Sure wish your mama and papa could see you now" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 185).

The tom-buck character type is distinguishable from the "race-man" and "comic" images by their misdirected and self-serving actions, like in the characterizations above. The "lost-man," however, is driven by self-destructive behavior which ultimately curtails his conscious development.

## Lost-Man

The "lost-man" character lives in limbo between boyishness and unrealized manhood. This is partly due to a lack of discipline, a lack of knowledge, and a distorted sense of commitment. With this type of Aframerican in mind, Akbar

says:

> Ultimately we must take responsibility for our own development. We have a choice to give up our boyish conduct and adopt the path to manhood. We must first recognize our confusion about the definition of manhood and understand that what we are calling "man" is either simply males or boys at play (Akbar 1991, 10).

In addition, the lost-man disrespects Aframerican women, and is even apt to oppose public protests against injustices like Apartheid. This characterization echoes one of Madhubuti's conclusions in Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?: "Most Afrikan Americans have been unable to look at their lives in a historical-racial-political-economic context" (Madhubuti 1990, 61). In Lee's films, some lost-man character types are seen as sexist, drug addicts, and deceptive.

In Lee's School Daze, sexism characterizes Julian/Big Brother Almighty as a lost-man. Julian's lost-man characterization emerges through his views and his relationships with Aframerican women. He dehumanizes and humiliates them. In a heated scene of fraternity pledging, Julian angrily pressures Half-Pint: "You better get a freak over here tonight . . . I don't care if she's blind, fat, no teeth, and has one leg with a kick stand. I ain't pledging no virgins" (Lee and Jones 1988, 200). The fact that Julian angrily shouts these demeaning epithets supports Bambara's description of Julian's fraternity as "the men-as-predators/women-as-prey brotherhood" (Bambara 1991, 52). For example, when Julian "gives" his ex-girlfriend, Jane, to Half-

Pint, he is essentially orchestrating a rape (Lee 1988). Here, Julian belittles his Aframerican female counterparts to mere sex objects.

Julian does not attain the Akbarian level of manhood. Akbar says: "When your view of women is exclusively of someone to satisfy your various needs, then you are a boy" (Akbar 1991, 9). Similarly, Madhubuti says casual sexual relations (in Julian's case, forced) diminish the idea of sex from a family context: "The proponents of this approach cannot possibly be serious about anything or anyone other than themselves" (Madhubuti 1990, 87). Clearly, Julian's actions do not contribute to familial or communal development. Based on these observations, Julian is not succeeding into manhood, as long as he perpetrates boyish schemes and degrades Aframerican women.

Another lost-man characteristic about Julian is that he does not move beyond his distorted reality of manhood to a realistic and responsible level in which men take on the challenges of moving a community forward. Julian's first audible words in School Daze to Dap, the leader of an anti-Apartheid rally on campus, reveal this confusion. He says: "We [Gamma Phi Gamma] don't approve of this African mumbo jumbo and we're here to let you know about it" (Lee and Jones 1988, 190). His interests seem to revolve around building his fraternity, not to a global struggle against the Apartheid government in South Africa--a struggle connected to that of

Aframericans. Moreover, he is seen leading pledgees (Gammites) almost to the movie's finale. However, Julian does not represent Akbar's conclusion:

> Men who have come into a consciousness of who they are in terms of their true identity, in terms of their true capacities for knowledge and consciousness, are able to move and to change the world (Akbar 1991, 15).

Julian must first change himself, then he may move beyond his fraternal euphoria and cultivate leadership skills to benefit all African peoples. Also, Julian's limited vision, of women and of politics display the type of ignorance that is unique to the lost-man character type.

In Jungle Fever, Gator is a lost-man character. He is a crack-cocaine addict, a liar, and a thief. He appears throughout the movie begging family members for money to buy crack. We first meet Gator as he is visiting his mother, Lucinda Doctor, to get money. Gator has been forbidden by his father, Revered Doctor, from visiting their home, because of his drug addiction. However, dressed in a white shirt and wearing a tie, Gator tells his mother "I got this great new job, but there's one, only one catch. The application costs one hundred dollars" (Lee 1991). Then, near the movie's finale, Gator returns for more money, and demonstrates his lost-man mentality, when he contemptuously refuses a figurine his mother offers him:

> GATOR:
> Mama I need money. I'm sick. In order for me to get right I need money!
> LUCINDA DOCTOR:

> You'll be a whole lot better if you had a bath! Boy, the Devil's got you. . . . What happened to that one hundred dollars I gave you last time, and the time before that and the time before that?
> GATOR:
> As God as my witness. I swear 'fore God and four more White people, this the very last time I ask.
> LUCINDA DOCTOR:
> Lies! Lies! You must be out of your right mind.
> GATOR:
> You got money in this house. Mama give it to me. . . . You got more money than this twenty dollars. I don't want that shit. I want some money (Lee 1991).

In this scene, before his death, Gator is operating in the "male" stage of manhood development. Akbar says:

> Such people have a primary concern of being taken care of. Their cry is: "Feed me . . . satisfy my biological needs." The emphasis is on "Give it to me." The nature of this mind is one that has to beg. It is a hungry mind that is constantly wanting more and is constantly getting it by asking for a handout (Akbar 1991, 4-5).

According to a publication for the National Institute On Drug Abuse, drug addicts display the following behavior:

> They can no longer relate to anything other than drug seeking and drug taking. They experience extreme mental and physical symptoms when they are in need of drugs and will do whatever is necessary to obtain them (Multicultural Drug Abuse Prevention Resource Center 1977, 10).

This description fits Gator's actions. He wants money to buy drugs and no substitute, nor anything less than what he wants, will suffice. He is a "lost-man," searching hopelessly for a means to escape real-life challenges through self-destruction. Lee's resolution for this lost-man is prayer and death:

> REVEREND DOCTOR:
> My own flesh and blood. My first born son and I love you, but you're evil and you're better-off dead. . . . I pray for you my son. Father I stretch

> my hands to You [He shoots Gator in the stomach, then lays the gun on top of the open Bible on a table.] (Lee 1991).

In X, Bembry exhibits other lost-man traits. He displays elements of Akbar's "boyish" descriptions (Akbar 1991, 4, 8). Bembry is a traitor to his fellows, like a boy scheming to win a game. In a sequence of scenes, Bembry proves himself to be a liar who manipulates others for his own selfish benefit. Early during Malcolm's rise within the Nation of Islam, Bembry goes to Elijah Muhammad, and says: "Your holy apostle, dear Messenger, I am your true servant and the brothers asked me to tell you Malcolm is getting too much press" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 275). Later, Betty, Malcolm's wife, points out to him: "Bembry is the editor of the newspaper you established. Ask him why your name hasn't been in Muhammad Speaks in over a year?" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 284). Then, in a scene of deceit, Bembry betrays Malcolm:

> What are you talking about--"blackout"? Some of the Brothers are a little jealous. Maybe they think you been a little--over publicized. That's all. Forget it. It's nothing (Bembry puts an arm around him, man-to-man) (Lee and Wiley 1992, 286).

Next, after Elijah Muhammad silences Malcolm for speaking publicly about John F. Kennedy's assassination: "As the door is being closed [to Elijah's room], WE SEE Bembry kneeling before Elijah and kissing his hand" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 289). In Bembry's final scene, he is on television saying "We feel this [fire-bombing of Malcolm's house] is a publicity stunt on the part of Malcolm X" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 299).

The fact that Bembry is supposed to be a community building Aframerican man makes his betrayal of Malcolm and his deception of Elijah Muhammad the more shocking. As such, Bembry exemplifies the dual persona Madhubuti describes of those Aframericans he says will "take advantage of political movements and will pimp Blackness" (Madhubuti 1990, 21-22). That is, they will pretend to be working in the best interest of the Aframerican community, but are advancing their own selfish interests.

Lee's lost-man characters are not unfamiliar to Aframerican filmmakers. Traitors like Bembry, sexists like Julian, drug addicts and dealers reoccur in films by other Aframericans, including Mario Van Peebles' New Jack City (1991), John Singelton's Boyz in the Hood (1991), and Mattie Rich's Straight Out of Brooklyn (1991). However, unlike the fabrications of early Euramerican filmmakers, at least Lee and his contemporaries do not create exaggerations or emasculate their Aframerican male characters.

The lost-man seems unredeemable. His destructive behavior affords few implications that he will elevate his lack of self-consciousness. On the other hand, the "race-man" character type embodies the strength and awareness to propel himself beyond self-imposed limitations.

## Race Man

The first, and probably the most important, quality of the race-man characterization is that it is diametrically

opposed to the classic tom. In Literary Garveyism, Tony Martin describes how Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay "never could fully reconcile himself to the role of race man," in the Garvey sense (Martin 1983, 10).

> His novel, Home to Harlem, caused Garvey in 1928 to place him among those guilty of "prostituting their intelligence, under the direction of the White man, to bring out and show up the worst traits of our people. . . ." The book was, in Garvey's view, "a damnable libel against the Negro" (Martin 1983, 10).

In the present study, the race-man represents qualities in Charles Thomas' description of manhood, in Boys No More. These qualities include being "aggressive, independent, and at times hostile in dealing with groups and institutional failings that maintained him as a passive, dependent, self-defeating person" (Thomas 1971, 122). Similarly, the race-man character initiates protests against injustices against him or his community, and he challenges anyone who tries to deny the legitimacy of his protests.

In addition to community efforts, some race-men commit to marriage and take on the responsibilities of fatherhood. These character types represent the ideal stage in the Akbarian model of manhood which is only achieved through personal growth. "The force that transforms the person from being a boy to becoming a man is knowledge. The boy takes his budding rationality and uses it to expand his consciousness" (Akbar 1991, 12). This consciousness is what enables boys to stop "playing games" and accept responsibility for more than

their immediate personal needs. A portion of Madhubuti's "Afrikan American Father's Pledge" also reflects the leadership potential of the race-man as husband and father. It says:

> As a father, I will attempt to provide my family with an atmosphere of love and security to aid them in their development into sane, loving, productive, spiritual, hard-working, creative Afrikan Americans (Madhubuti 1990, 194).

The giving of time, energy, and the making of a commitment is what separates the men from the boys in Lee's race-man characters.

In School Daze, Dap appears in the opening scene and announces his race-man role, while demonstrating his commitment to making the fictive Mission College divest from the apartheid government in South Africa. In this scene Dap stands outside the school's Administration Building, in front of a small sea of brown, caramel and ebony faces, and asks:

> How is it [Columbia, Harvard, Yale] have divested their money in South Africa and we backward Negroes here at the so-called finest Black school in the land, Mission College, are holding on to it like how a wino clutches his last bottle? To me, this is indefensible. Our Black sisters and brothers are dying in South Africa every day and here we are assisting the racist regime of Botha and the South African government. We gotta move on this. This is a moral dilemma. I propose continued pressure on the administration and faculty till it's dealt with. Till we have completely divested. We should march, protest, disrupt classes, shut the school down if need be. Stay all in their ass (Lee and Jones 1988, 187).

This speech by Dap, and his later explanation to some "local yokels": "You're not niggers" (Lee and Jones 1988, 277), and

his "wake up!" call in the final scene, all contribute to his race-man characterization.

Dap represents that level of manhood that enables one to look beyond oneself. His characterization mirrors Akbar's remarks on commitment. Akbar concludes: "When you are able to spread your sentiments to include more than just yourself, then you are growing into manhood" (Akbar 1991, 14). This is an important quality, because the race-man is beyond the consciousness that centers around selfishness. Like Dap, race-men exhibit a moral obligation to members of the African community throughout the world.

Malcolm X is the quintessential example of the race-man character in Lee's X, based upon Malcolm's evolution from boy to man. Early in the film, we see Malcolm--as a lost-man--in the "male" stage, when he is using drugs, stealing, and dating Sophia. However, while in prison, Malcolm comes under the tutelage of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and converts to Islam, after shaving his hair to eliminate the chemicals he adds to "straighten" it. At this point, Malcolm begins to take on the attributes of the race-man characterization: commitment, morality, and consciousness.

However, it is not until after Malcolm makes a pilgrimage to Mecca, and separates from the Nation of Islam, that he begins to display characteristics of the ideal consciousness of independent Aframerican manhood. In a news conference scene, Malcolm admits: "In the past I thought the

thoughts, spoke the words of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, that day is over. From now on I speak my own words, and think my own thoughts" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 290). It is this revelation, and the acceptance of responsibility for his own actions, that make Malcolm stand out as an ideal race-man. Denzel Washington's interpretation of his role, as Malcolm, reveals a similar characterization:

> My desire, my prayer is for this film to show how a man or a woman can evolve even when the worse things happen to you, even when you've been taught to hate. When everything in your life has taught you to hate. You can still evolve, you know. That's my desire, to reflect that in this role. To show the spiritual, political, and philosophical evolution of a man who happens to be named Malcolm X (Lee and Wiley 1992, 116-117).

As a race-man, Malcolm represents the consciousness, the commitment, and the potential of Aframerican manhood.

The characterization of "De Lawd," in The Green Pastures (1936), is probably the closest Euramerican filmmakers have ever come to creating an Aframerican male character with any resemblance to the race-man character. Although both images are of Aframerican men, the race-man character is more realistic for Aframerican audiences. Commenting on the Aframerican audiences' reactions to The Green Pastures, Bogle says:

> Nothing could have been more absurd. For Negroes of the period never pictured historical or biblical events in terms of their own experience. Indeed, the problem was that they always dreamt of a White heaven and a White heavenly host (Bogle 1989, 27).

The consciousness and the commitment of Lee's race-men, in

general, Dap's commitment and Malcolm's evolution are far removed from the earlier passive and subdued characterizations of Aframerican men in film. The tom characters are contented and faithful servants who accept whatever treatment their enslavers would inflict. Moreover, the lost-man characters do not appear to possess the consciousness that could lead them to endeavors outside of their personal and egotistical agendas. In contrast, the race-man represents the potential (or the ideal) of Aframerican manhood.

## Comics

Another Aframerican male character type that reoccurs in American film is the comic. Like the stereotypical "coon," the comic character functions as comic relief. The term "coon" is an abbreviation of "raccoon" which was "used by southern Whites as a derisive reference to Black males" (Dates and Barlow 1990, 14). This term adds to the humiliation which Euramerican actors, filmmakers, and writers would force Aframerican male characters to suffer. However, the renovated comic character does not subject himself to degrading routines or actions.

Stepin Fetchit is well known for his coon antics from the 1930s. Null says, Stepin Fetchit represents

> the worst aspects of the servant archetype--the comically incompetent idiot whose head scratching, eye rolling, and shuffling were the constant butt of more or less tolerantly superior Whites (Null 1975, 36).

In contrast, Lee's comic characters are unlike the coon

stereotypes who would stimulate laughter by performing humiliating antics. Their dialogues, personalities, and costumes combine to reveal their comic characterizations. In addition, these renovated comics sometimes contribute more than humor to the plot.

In Lee's first feature film, She's Gotta Have It, Mars Blackmon is one of the Aframerican male characters who attempt to tell Nola's story. Mars, unfortunately, is not taken seriously by the other characters, since the other characters cannot help but laugh at his comic appearance and personality.

Mars' introduction in the film is the first example of his role as a comic character. The camera is positioned at the bottom of "Dead Man's Hill" and Mars is speeding down the hill, on a bike with no brakes, into a tight close-up. He suddenly stops, and, as Lee describes, "He laughs like a madman" (Lee 1987, 290). Although this act appears dangerous, it is not dehumanizing, nor is it emasculating. Mars' introduction is probably better described as suspenseful humor, because of the tension or uncertainty created as he is speeding down the hill, and his laughter.

In another scene, Nola Darling hurts Mars' feelings, and he disguises his pain with a humorous response. Here, Mars illustrates Lee's description of this character's role in She's Gotta Have It: "Mars is to humor her" (Lee 1987, 44):

> Mars tries to mask his hurt and attempts to make her laugh. This is never a hard task for him.
> MARS:
> Did I ever tell you 'bout the time I used to be a

super hero?
NOLA:
No. I must have missed that one.
MARS:
Close your eyes.
Nola closes her eyes and he ducks under the sheets, then emerges.
MARS:
You can look now.
Nola opens her eyes and is dying laughing.
MARS:
I used to be Panty Man. Do you smell something? Sniff. Sniff.
Mars is wearing Nola's panties over his head. He sees through the holes where the legs go in. Nola is in tears.
NOLA:
You're buggin'.
Mars takes the panties off his head.
MARS:
Nobody makes you laugh like me. C'mon, 'fess up. 'Fess up.
NOLA:
Nobody (Lee 1987, 317).

At the end of this scene, Mars asks Nola, "Did I ever tell you about the time I useta dance for Ailey?" (Lee 1987, 319). In the direction notes, Lee writes: "Mars does some wild spastic moves. He's a sight, his skinny body, his long legs dancing in his underpants. Nola is dying [laughing]" (Lee 1987, 319). These excerpts only show Mars being humorous with Nola. However, throughout the film he appears joking with other characters. His comic remarks inform the audience of Nola's hyper-sexual characterization, in addition to revealing his role as a comic relief character.

In Do The Right Thing, "Sweet Dick Willie," a member of a group of Aframerican men Lee calls "The Corner Men," is a comic character. Lee's description of "The Corner Men" is apt, because throughout the movie they (Sweet Dick Willie,

Sid, and ML) are seen sitting near a street corner, in folding chairs, talking about one another and their mothers, and complaining about the state of their neighborhood.

In one scene, Sweet Dick Willie makes a nonchalant and comic response to questions about the surplus of Korean business owners in their community. Sweet Dick Willie resolves that "It's Miller time. Let me go give these Koreans s'more business" (Lee and Jones 1989, 175). Sweet Dick Willie's comic response is a sarcastic commentary on the state of Aframericans, as primarily consumers in their own communities and not business owners. Moreover, Sweet Dick Willie's name has derogatory connotations, like the old coon types.

According to Cripps, at one point "74 percent of [Aframerican characters] were known in the credits by some demeaning first name" (Cripps 1977, 112). For example, Bogle describes that actor Willie Best had been known as: "Sleep 'n' Eat, a name that, like Fetchit's, conjured up a darky image: the coon is content as long as he has enough to eat and a place to sleep" (Bogle 1989, 71).

Moreover, the name "Sweet Dick Willie" has sexual and "macho" connotations. The "Sweet Dick" portion alludes to the character's sexual prowess. This could have come from himself or from sexual relations. The tactile or "Sweet Dick" imagery alludes to oral copulation. In addition, ML's response to the name "Sweet Dick Willie," contributes to the "macho" imagery.

ML says, "Negroes kill me, always holdin' onto, talkin' 'bout their dicks" (Lee and Jones 1989, 212). Akbar's description of the "male" mentality is similar to this "macho" like emphasis:

> The male defines who he is by the power of his anatomical protrusion and then further defines the value of what he is by the volume, the depth, the length, and the activity of that anatomical protrusion (Akbar 1991, 5).

Also, in Mo' Better Blues, Butterbean, wearing a fuchsia suit and a matching wide brimmed hat, is a comic character. Butterbean does stand-up comedy at the fictive nightclub, "Beneath the Underground," where we see him settle down a heckler:

> BUTTERBEAN:
> Sir, why are you fuckin' with me?
> STERLING [heckler]:
> Why? Cuz you're so country. So Bama. I didn't know niggers like you still existed. This is the 1990s. We're out of slavery.
> BUTTEBEAN:
> Where are you from?
> STERLING:
> The Upper East Side.
> BUTTERBEAN:
> What the fuck is the Upper East Side?
> STERLING:
> Manhattan, New York City. The Big Apple.
> BUTTERBEAN:
> What's your name?
> STERLING:
> Sterling Randolph.
> BUTTEBEAN:
> Sterling Randolph, my name is Butterbean, and I'm from a little country town called Two Seconds Fresh Offa Nigger's Ass. Keep fuckin' with me and I'm gonna be homesick.
> The crowd roars (Lee and Jones 1990, 226).

Unlike stereotypical coon characters, Butterbean is loud mouthed and recalcitrant. Furthermore, he does not perform

comic antics, nor does he work as a servant, but he is a comic creator. One criticism of the coon type concludes: "The laughs often came at the expense of a Black male character, who is reduced to shivering wretchedness" (Leab 1965, 44). In contrast, Butterbean stimulates laughter with his jokes, and does not perform degrading antics.

These comic types have not been a recurring characterization for Aframerican males in film. However, they appear today in modified forms. For example, the "sambo" and "coon" types, usually have been the objects of some form of humiliation, in order to stimulate laughter (Null 1975, 8; Bogle 1989, 43). On the contrary, the renovated comic cordially interacts with other characters, and does not become the object of degrading acts.

The tom-buck, lost-man, race-man and comic character types are some predominating images of Aframerican males in Lee's films. Lee's examples are testimony that Aframerican male images cannot only be destitute and shamelessly violent, but also ideal models of Aframerican masculinity in films. They are not mere monosyllabic, lackey types with no self-respect. Lee's variety of Aframerican male characterizations includes renovated images, from which Aframerican audiences may gain some viable interpretations. In comments on the Aframerican community's response to Aframerican art, Carolyn Fowler speaks of a similar phenomenon, which she calls "image reversal":

> Racial features or cultural habits, when stylized in an appropriately exploited medium, are perceived by the senses in new and beautiful ways, can then be meditated upon by the spirit, causing our souls to grow stronger (Fowler 1981, viii).

Fowler's comment, and Lee's Aframerican male characters resemble Gordon Parks' recommendation for Aframerican directors "to protect and interpret the roles in a way that will no longer be offensive to Blacks" (Murray 1973, 67).

# PART II. SPIKE LEE AND THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

## CHAPTER 4

## MONTAGE, THE CAMERA EYE, SOUND, ECONOMY, FORESHADOWING, SIMULTANEOUS COMMUNICATION, CONTINUITY

Aframerican artists usually bring unique perspectives to their works. An essay written in Alain Locke's The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance (1925) describes Aframerican art as "a great art because it embodies the Negroe's individual traits and reflects their suffering, aspirations and joys" (Barnes 1925, 19). Moreover, the function of art as a means to an end beyond itself has been a well known fact in the Aframerican community for a long time. Writers like Ralph Ellison in Shadow and Act (1953), James Baldwin in Nobody Knows My Name (1954), Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in Black Fire (1968), Pearl Cleage in Mad At Miles (1990), and many others have come to similar conclusions about the impact of art. In "Black Art and Black Liberation," Larry Neal succinctly describes the social and the political potential of art, in his description of the "Black Arts Movement":

> It is primarily concerned with the cultural and spiritual liberation of Black America. It takes upon itself the task of expressing, through various art forms, the Soul of the Black Nation. And like the Black Power Movement, it seeks to define the world of art and culture in its own terms. The Black Arts movement seeks to link, in a highly conscious manner, art and politics in order to assist in the liberation of Black people (Neal 1969, 54).

This point is pivotal when discussing Aframerican art. Similarly, co-producer Ernest Dickerson recalls that in making

School Daze: "We were determined to make a film which would allow Black folks to see themselves up on the screen and really feel proud; proud about who they are and how they look" (Lee and Jones 1988, 23).

Film is a medium dependent upon sight and sound. How a director puts a film together is everything to successful filmmaking. Through various techniques, filmmakers intellectualize images to convey their message. These images reveal aspects of characterization, plot, theme, and they also become examples of irony, motifs, symbolism and other artistic representations. Some of the terms used to describe the techniques and images below commonly appear in literary criticism, but their presence in film comes through technical manipulations. Moreover, although Lee's Aframerican male characters appear in the supporting examples, this section does not focus on characterization, but on Lee as a filmmaker and director, and his artistic representations.

Montage

Filmmaking is, in some ways, similar to writing a novel. "Its vocabulary and grammar are composed of individual shots and shots in sequence. The individual shots correspond to sentences, the sequences of shots to paragraphs" (Sheridan et al. 1965, 1). A basic understanding for this technique is montage ("juxtaposition of separate images"). This film technique suggests "that meaning is not inherent in any one shot but is created by the juxtaposition of shots" (Sobchack

and Sobchack 1987, 143, 144). Each scene (paragraph) shows some action, reveals more about the plot or the characters, and contributes to the film's overall theme. Sometimes these shots show action with the accompaniment of little or no dialogue, and the camera shows the viewer what is happening, and no verbal explanation is needed.

Lee uses photographs to create a montage in which there is no dialogue. This montage is an example of tracking. Edgar Roberts describes tracking as a technique in which the camera follows a "moving character" in an action scene (Roberts 1983, 228). In She's Gotta Have It, for example, Jamie is seen taking the subway to Nola's, in a succession of ten still photographs. Jamie is shown waiting for, entering, riding, and exiting the subway train. There is no speaking in this scene, but music plays throughout. The entire sequence is a manipulation of still photography and film.

In the film's companion book, Spike Lee's Gotta Have It: Inside Guerrilla Filmmaking, Lee labels the photographs with names that reflect Jamie's actions in them. In "Jamie Going to Nola's," Jamie is waiting as the train slows in front of him. In "Enough is Enough," he is leaning on the arm rest of his seat, with his right hand against his forehead; and in "A Man Can Only Take So Much," Jamie is sitting upright, but his image is blurred and out of focus to suggest that something has upset him (Lee 1987, 89, 138-139). By the end of this montage, the viewer does not have to experience an otherwise

exhausting train wait and ride, and the action continues at Nola's apartment.

Also, Lee combines the use of "stopped time" or "freeze frame" (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987, 129), with tracking in this montage. This gives the scene a motion effect, when we are actually watching a series of photographs.

The Camera Eye

In film, point of view is not limited to dialogue. At times, directors may allow the camera to take on a "speaking" role, or personify the camera. Depending on a camera's placement, "It may establish a locale and a perspective by means of a long shot; . . . it may, in addition, assume some of the prerogatives of a conscious observer" (Sheridan et al. 1965, 32). That is, from a distance the camera eye may focus close to an object, look up to or down toward something, or the director may communicate something to the audience through the camera's angle.

Jungle Fever has a poignant scene in which the camera takes on human-like qualities. When Flipper and Angie are outside on a New York residential street pretending to argue, the camera eye peers down from an upper-level apartment window across the street, onto the unsuspecting lovers. An interpretation of the use of the long shot says:

> The filmmaker can choose to place the camera far away from the principal subject, forcing the viewer to see the surroundings in which the subject is located and the relationship between that subject and its context (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987, 83).

The camera eye becomes the unseen eyewitness whom the police officer claims makes a report that "A Afro-American male was attacking a Caucasian woman" (Lee 1991). From the camera's point of view, Flipper is forcing Angie against a parked car, as she struggles to free herself from his grip. Flipper is shouting: "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" (Lee 1991). The subsequent arrival of the police is the result of the actions of the personified camera. However, no one is seen in the room from which the camera eye peers downward at Angie and Flipper. No one is heard moving, breathing, or calling the police from the apartment either.

In the previous example, Lee demonstrates an assumption against interethnic couples--that Aframerican men only assault Euramerican women. An account from one Euramerican woman, whose husband is Aframerican, illustrates this implication: "When we walked down the street together, there was always some wise guy--a cop or just a pedestrian--who would stop and ask if that man was molesting me" (Wilkinson 1982, 206). Thus, Lee uses the camera eye to reflect a similar assumption, by implying the camera's actions.

Sound

Film is a visual and auditory medium. Sound is needed to hear the characters' dialogues, reveal themes, and to create images and characterizations. Sound effects range from animal sounds, punches in fight scenes, and children playing, to elaborate scenes of singing and dancing, as seen in films

like Hallelujah (1929) and The Littlest Rebel (1935). Lee uses many sound effects and other visual and auditory manipulations in his works.

In She's Gotta Have It, Lee uses sound to reveal part of Jamie's characterization. In one scene, the camera is close-up to Jamie, as he talks to Nola on the telephone. He is undressed and in the bed with Faith (the dancer from Nola's birthday celebration). Nola's presence in the frame is only through her voice on the phone, as she begs Jamie to come to her apartment: "It's very important. Come right over," Nola pleads. Jamie pauses, and only barking dogs are heard by the listening viewer (Lee 1987). These are examples of asynchronous sound or a sound effect "whose source is not visible on the screen (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987, 184). In an earlier section, we describe Jamie as a romantic. However, the barking dogs in the background include him in what Lee calls the "dog" characterizations of some Aframerican men in She's Gotta Have It (Rohter 1986, 18). Moreover, Jamie is the only male character in She's Gotta Have It to be seen in bed with two different women. This example shows a result of adding sound to camera shots; however, taking sound away from shots can create an image that becomes just as prominent.

Lee literally tunes a character out of a scene in Mo' Better Blues. The sequence begins with a close-up of Bleek, with Clarke standing behind him:

> As Clarke rambles on with her sarcastic speech, we fade down her sound, as Bleek does the same.

CLOSE-BLEEK
He tunes her out.
CLOSE-CLARKE
Her mouth is moving but we can't hear what she's saying. We hear instead:
BLEEK (VO) 'No woman can respect you after you say there's nothing more to your life than what you have with her.'
CLOSE-BLEEK
He's playing the piano.
CLOSE-CLARKE
We begin to fade up on her sound (Lee and Jones 1990, 245-246).

The viewer sees Clarke speaking, but does not hear her. By fading out Clarke's voice in the above scene, Lee shows the intense concentration Bleek devotes to his music. The audience hears Bleek speaking internally, as if it is inside his head listening. This is an example of "selective sound," which "puts us physically inside the character we see on the screen, allowing us to feel as if we are participating in the action" (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987, 191). In addition, the camera is close-up on Bleek, and Clarke is seen in the background. Bleek is absorbed in his music, and not even Clarke's rambling shouts can penetrate the silence the audience experiences from his point of view.

Economy

Fast forwarding time, and eliminating dialogue and characters in shots are examples of film economy. Economy may occur in film when action or characters are not seen. These shots include limited resources, such as little dialogue, or photographs instead of live action. Moreover, some economy shots make references to action the audience never sees

(Sheridan et al. 1965, 12-13).

In She's Gotta Have It, for example, a second speaker is present in a shot, but is not heard nor seen. Mars establishes the unseen persona by looking directly towards the camera and answering: "What? Yeah. I know Nola Darling. What about it? What do you wanna know?" (Lee 1987, 290). This scene eliminates dialogue and the presence of someone asking questions. Mars is alone in the frame, and this "mono-dialogue" acknowledges the unseen interviewer. Nelson George describes this technique as:

> Spikeism--devices sprinkled throughout the feature that stop the narrative yet reinforce the film's theme. For instance, Lee loves to have people talk to the camera--he has such scenes in all his works (George 1991, 80).

In this scene, Mars is about to add his version to the descriptions of Nola's hyper-sexual characterization. This confession-like technique is used to introduce Greer and Jamie, and is how they sometimes respond to the camera persona's questions.

An unseen, but heard, character is an example of economy in Do The Right Thing. This economical use of dialogue occurs with Mookie and Tina in the main setting, Sal's Famous Pizzeria. Mookie is seen listening, and Tina is only heard shouting through the telephone about Mookie's infrequent visits to see her and Hector, their son. At the same time, Sal and Pino are telling him to get off the telephone. Tina is heard yelling throughout the sequence, while the other

three characters in the frame only say a few short one-liners.

As a result, the viewer learns that Mookie has to work, provide for Hector, and maintain a relationship with Tina. However, George observes that Mookie's "avoidance of his responsibilities as a father to little Hector and as Tina's man reveal his irresponsible life-style and portend his limited future" (George 1991, 80). On the contrary, the final scene has a more encouraging outlook for Mookie than George's conclusions above, in addition to an example of economy. At the film's end, Mookie tells Sal "I gotta go see my kid," and the storefront Disc Jockey, Señor Love Daddy is heard, but not seen, saying "Mookie, go on home to your kid" (Lee 1989a).

X also uses unseen action as an example of economy. Malcolm, a small army of Muslims, and an angry crowd march to the city jail, then to Harlem Hospital, to save a victim of police brutality. The next shot is a close-up of a newspaper headline: "Malcolm X Wins $70,000 Judgment for Beaten Negro." These shots illustrate economical use of dialogue and action. By inserting the results of Malcolm's actions, Lee fast forwards the plot's setting in time, eliminates court scenes, and scenes of Malcolm's role in winning the lawsuit.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is "the arrangement and presentation of events and information . . . in such a way that later events in the work are prepared for" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 209). This effect results from dialogue and through action.

Respectively, Bleek and Radio Raheem are subjects of foreshadowing in Mo' Better Blues and Do The Right Thing. Sal foreshadows Radio Raheem's murder in Do The Right Thing. In the film's beginning, Sal says "I'm gonna kill somebody today" (Lee 1989). Near the film's end, Sal "kills" Radio Raheem's radio which starts a fight between the two, until the police place Radio Raheem in a choke-hold and kill him. Although Sal is not Radio Raheem's physical murderer, he initiates the violence in this foreshadowed murder scene. When Sal "kills" the radio, by beating it with his baseball bat, he is figuratively killing Radio Raheem too.

During this scene, the viewer witnesses the action (killing) Sal warns about in the film's beginning. At the same time, Sal's frustration and the policeman's murder of Radio Raheem may reflect the wishes of those people George says "view young African Americans with ghetto blasters as public nuisances whose presence challenges society's standards" (George 1991, 79). Thus, the killing of Radio Raheem is the action Sal foreshadows, and it represents the frustration George describes.

Bleek is also the subject of foreshadowing in Mo' Better Blues. He becomes the musician his girlfriend, Indigo, alludes to in an early scene. Indigo tells him: "My moms always told me, don't ever marry a musician, let alone go out with one. You'll be inviting grief, tears, pain and heartbreak to your doorstep" (Lee 1990). After the movie's

climax, Bleek emerges from a year-long isolation. He begs and pleads with Indigo to love and marry him, and the earlier foreshadowing comes to light. With hurt in her eyes and anguish on her face, Indigo recalls to Bleek: "You didn't return my calls, my letters, refused my visits. What about my life this past year?" (Lee 1990). In this example, Lee forces the viewer to imagine Indigo's "grief, pain and heartbreak" when Bleek is in seclusion. Nevertheless, Indigo prepares the viewer for her experience early in the film. Charles Johnson says this reunion represents their "surrender to each other" (Johnson 1991, 124), even after Indigo suffers the "pain and heartbreak" her mother warns her about. Bleek's surrender is to his prolonged resistance to allow a woman to be a priority in his life, instead of his music.

In these two examples, the foreshadowing occurs through dialogues. Also, in both, the foreshadowing consists of at least two sequences that illustrate manipulations of time. In Do The Right Thing, time elapses from day to night; and in Mo' Better Blues, at least one year separates Indigo's foreshadowing from the expected action.

Simultaneous Communication

Film time is measured in several ways. Obviously, there is the time it takes to make the film, and the time it takes for the viewer to watch the film in its entirety. Then there are techniques to manipulate film time. Some of these include compressing, expanding, stopping, flashing-back and flashing-

forward time (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987, 112-142). However, two poignant manipulations of time (simultaneous communication and continuity) occur in Lee's X and School Daze, to create suspense, and to reveal characterizations.

Camera angles that reveal some unspoken fact or some other relevant information to the viewer are simultaneous communications. These shots are usually one long or short shot, or a close-up. With this manipulation of time, "The picture shows us many things at once, in one instantaneous communication" (Sheridan et al. 1965, 5). These camera shots may also show elapsed time, and they may contribute to characterizations. Most importantly, simultaneous communication often reveals things to the viewer that some characters do not know about. This effect can create "suspense not only by showing the viewer a series of unresolved scenes, but also by allowing the viewer an omniscience that the characters themselves do not have" (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987, 127).

Sometimes simultaneous communication is blatant. In School Daze, for example, Lee has the camera show the viewer that the blindfolded Gammites are reaching into bathroom toilets and squeezing peeled bananas. The Gammites' faces are contorted, and they are screaming along with the taunts and jeers of their "big brothers" to "squish" what they think is human feces.

An example of simultaneous communication occurs in X to

create suspense. In the scene, Lee creates a montage of Malcolm's ride to the Audubon Ballroom, his assassins' preparation and ride to the same location, and Betty and their kids' ride there too. Lee's direction notes in By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X . . . best describe this simultaneous communication:

> A blue 1962 Cadillac passes a sign that says Patterson, New Jersey.
> ANGLE-CAR
> The assassins are on their way to the Audubon Ballroom, Wilbur Kinley is behind the wheel, no one is talking.
> EXT. STREET-DAY
> Betty is driving to the Audubon Ballroom, her four daughters are in the backseat [(playing)] making a racket.
> EXT. STREET-DAY
> Malcolm drives to the Audubon Ballroom.
> EXT. GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE-DAY
> The assassins are driving over the George Washington Bridge.
> EXT. STREET-DAY
> CLOSE-BETTY
> Betty is trying to quiet down her daughters as she drives.
> EXT. STREET-DAY
> CLOSE-MALCOLM
> Malcolm is in deep thought as he drives.
> INT. AUDUBON BALLROOM-DAY
> Betty and her four kids walk into the ballroom.
> ANGLE. The rest of the assassins come in and go to their positions along with the rest of the crowd, the place is starting to fill up.
> EXT. STREET-DAY
> Malcolm drives past the Audubon Ballroom, people are going in but no cops are present.
> ANGLE-STREET
> Malcolm parks his car, it's four blocks away. He turns off the ignition and sits there (Lee and Wiley 1992, 303-304).

This sequence is at least sixty seconds. By inserting these shots, Lee is able to elapse time, and to inform the viewer of the actions of at least ten people, follow their rides to the

Audubon Ballroom, while presenting three points of view, that of Malcolm, Betty, and the assassins.

Continuity

Continuity exists in a film when two shots visually communicate their relationship to each other. These shots reveal a connection, make a contrast, or show a transition in the film. Their order shows time elapse, characterizations, and other actions which contribute to the film's overall theme (Sheridan et al. 1965, 15-16). Manipulations of time illustrate continuity, in Mo' Better Blues and X.

A significant amount of time elapses between two early shots in Mo' Better Blues. The camera focuses close-up to child Bleek playing his trumpet, in his parents' living room. The year is 1969. There is an abrupt or "smash" cut to a close-up of Bleek playing his trumpet, twenty years later. He is on a nightclub stage leading "The Bleek Quintet."

Lee's flash-forwarding of time creates movement in the film by placing Bleek in different time-settings in subsequent shots. This transition eliminates an extensive biography of Bleek's life, and allows the plot to develop around his adult relationships with women and music. At the same time, these shots connect Bleek to roots in a setting which the viewer can identify, such as a family and with a group of friends.

In X, Lee achieves continuity in showing Malcolm's evolving characterization. Though many examples exist in this film, the two scenes in which Malcolm responds to Euramerican

college girls are effective in illustrating his evolution:

> COED: Mr. X, I have a good heart. I'm a good person despite my Whiteness. What can the good White people like myself, who are not prejudiced, or racist, what can we do to help the cause?
> [The camera is close-up to Malcolm's face as he stares blankly at her.]
> MALCOLM: Nothing!
> . . . . . .
> [In a later scene,] Malcolm is checking in [at the New York Hilton] when he is approached by a young WHITE COED.
> COED: Mr. X, I have a good heart. I'm a good person despite my Whiteness. What can the good White people like myself who are not prejudiced do to help the cause of the Negro?
> [The camera is close-up to Malcolm's face]. He looks at her. He thinks. He speaks.
> MALCOLM: Let sincere White individuals find other White people who feel as they do and teach non-violence to those Whites who think and act so racist (Lee and Wiley 1992, 278, 300).

When Malcolm responds to the first coed, he is a minister for the Nation of Islam, and, as he explains later, he is thinking "the thoughts" and speaking "the words of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 290). By the time the second coed approaches Malcolm, he has been on a pilgrimage to Mecca, broken from the Nation of Islam, and he is beginning his fight for the human rights of all people of African descent throughout the world.

This example of continuity not only reveals Malcolm's independent characterization, but also reflects two distinct time settings to contrast Malcolm's evolving consciousness. Lee's illustration of some events in Malcolm's life provides the audience with a point of reference for his personality and his political activity.

These techniques illustrate some of Lee's artistic representations of Aframerican men. Lee creatively combines media like still photography and film, and techniques such as personification and sound. As a result, his caricatures do not appear one-dimensional, but as multi-dimensional human characters.

# CHAPTER 5

## IRONY, METAPHOR, MOTIF, REALISM, SYMBOLISM

### Irony

In simplest terms, irony occurs when an unexpected event happens, or when there is an unsuspected revelation about a character, a situation, or an object. Moreover, verbal irony is created when words or expressions convey meanings outside their literal context. Or, as Holman and Harmon put it, "The actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 264). In film, visual and sound devices create irony. Two shots may relate irony when the viewer is able to juxtapose shots and the contrasts appear. In addition, characters may reveal irony through their actions and dialogue (Sheridan et al. 1965, 8).

In She's Gotta Have It, Lee uses Greer and Nola in an example of a technique Cohen defines as "'irony of character'--a reversal of expected behavior in characters; related, of course, to irony of situation" (Cohen 1972, 187). In one sequence, Greer is exercising and bragging about his physical prowess, while Nola sits across from him watching. The following sequence begins with a close-up of Greer cutting into a thick steak, and Nola saying "For a person who's supposed to be a health nut, it's odd you still eat red meat" (Lee 1986). In these shots the irony is seen and spoken. Nola's observation of Greer exercising creates the expectation of Greer eating a "healthy" meal. The irony of this situation

is complete in the second sequence in which she eats a salad, and he devours a steak. In these shots the irony becomes obvious, because Greer's actions are unexpected and Lee juxtaposes the shots in the sequence. In addition, this observation reveals incongruities in Greer's personality. From Nola's point of view he is not as health conscious as he proclaims in the previous shot which may lead the audience to question him, too.

Jungle Fever includes an ironic scene which directly relates to the plot. After a sequence of shots in which Angie and Flipper are eating in their office, Flipper rambles: "You know, Angie, I've never cheated on my wife before. I mean, I'm, I'm a married man, happily married" (Lee 1991). But, as Angie turns to walk away, Flipper reaches for her arm and pulls her back to him. In the subsequent shots, they kiss and have sex. This example of irony shows Flipper acting unexpectedly. He contradicts his previous claims of fidelity when he has sex with Angie in the subsequent sequence. This ironic scene is an early turning point in the film's plot. This scene also impacts the rest of the film, with contrasts of black and white; love and lust; and temptation and resistance.

Metaphor

A metaphor shows "similarities in seemingly dissimilar things" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 298). In film, if a character or object appears in one shot, and a subsequent shot

has an image with similar qualities, they create a metaphor. One description of a metaphor in film says:

> Although the director may ordinarily use dissolves to show the melting or fusion of two events in time, he may occasionally dissolve one picture into another so that a man "becomes" metaphorically the animal or object which is seen next on the screen (Sheridan et al. 1965, 5).

In She's Gotta Have It, the dancers at Nola's birthday celebration are a metaphor of Jamie and Nola. A shot of the two lovers dissolves from Nola's kitchen, to the only colorized scene in the black and white film, where two dancers perform to a dramatic ballad about a girl with more than one lover. Thus, Nola "becomes" the female dancer and Jamie "becomes" her male dance partner. The sequence is a metaphor of Jamie, Nola, and her love quadrangle. This is a "large metaphor" because it is the "controlling image of a whole work" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 299). Likewise, the dancers pantomime episodes similar to those Jamie and Nola act out in the film, like their quarrel and reunion.

Lee also creates a metaphor in the characterizations of Malcolm and Shorty, in X. In one shot, Malcolm and Shorty sit staring into a movie screen, which has Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney playing outlaw characters. In the next scene, "Malcolm and Shorty are playing cops and robbers while passersby stare" (Lee and Wiley 1992, 182). Again, a sequence of two shots creates this metaphor.

This image shows Malcolm and Shorty's criminal characterizations. Like the screen characters of Cagney and

Bogart in the previous shot, Malcolm and Shorty become outlaws. The dissimilarities are obvious, however, Malcolm and Shorty are Aframerican males in an urban setting, unlike the Euramerican actors of the movie they view in the previous scene. In addition, this metaphor implies that film characters do impact the actions of some viewers. Soon after these shots, the viewer sees Malcolm leading a burglary ring, and Shorty as his main partner in a life of crime. Thus, they metaphorically become the outlaw characters Cagney and Bogart portray.

Motif

A motif is a recurring word, phrase, situation, or idea that can relate characterization and structure in a work (Holman and Harmon 1986, 273; Cohen 1973, 191). Visual and spoken motifs may appear in a film, when an image reappears in various settings or scenes throughout. Lee uses photographs, body parts, baseball, and dialogue as motifs in some of his works.

In Do The Right Thing, Lee uses a photograph and a character to create a motif. Smiley appears in the film's exposition introducing himself, and identifying Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. in a photograph together. Smiley reappears throughout Do The Right Thing, selling copies of the same photograph. He always holds the picture upright, while making a stuttered sales pitch. As a result of Buggin Out's protest that only photographs of Italian Americans are on

Sal's "Wall of Fame," and after Sal's Famous Pizzeria burns down, Smiley takes the opportunity to post one of the pictures of Malcolm and Martin on the charred wall.

Smiley and the photo recur to remind the audience of one of the film's conflicts: "How come [Sal] ain't got no brothers up [on the "Wall of Fame]?" (Lee 1989a). In a characterization of Smiley, George says:

> Smiley, the seller of magic-marker embellished photos of Malcolm X with Martin Luther King Jr., is the block's frustrated griot--a keeper of the historical flame who draws political pictures but whose speech impairment prevents him from conveying his message to others (George 1991, 79).

Although Smiley is not verbally articulate, his presence reminds the audience of the liberating messages of Malcolm and Martin. Thus, Smiley represents an unheard messenger, but he is also an active protester.

Lips are an obvious motif in Mo' Better Blues. Close-ups of Bleek's lips appear in the opening credits, then, throughout the movie close-ups on Bleek's lips are shown. There are tight close-ups of Bleek playing his horn, and of him kissing either of his girlfriends, Clarke or Indigo. There are several scenes and close shots with Bleek rubbing his first two fingers across his top and bottom lips, as well.

A poignant example of the lip motif is a camera shot of Bleek's swollen and bruised lips, as he lies unconscious in a hospital bed, after being beaten in a previous fight scene. Also, in one love scene, Clarke bites Bleek on his bottom lip,

and he protests: "Don't play with my lips. I make my living with my lips" (Lee 1990). Bleek's reaction shows the viewer how much he values his lips, and why the repeated lip close-ups are relevant.

The emphasis on Bleek's lips leads one reviewer to conclude that Bleek "transformed his talent from a blessing into a curse and drove away the people closest to him" (Johnson 1991, 123). The image of the lips at the film's beginning, and throughout the script support this conclusion. Overall, the lip motif unifies the film's depictions of a musician's struggles with himself, his horn, and his love life.

Realism

Typically, the realist chooses material or subject matter that reflects "the common, the average, the everyday" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 413). The object is to present issues the audience can relate to, not that which is exclusive to small segments of society like a royal family. In other words, the realist seeks to find and to express a truth that is "verifiable by experience" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 413). These examples are not exaggerations, but real-life representations and expectations. Thus, realism reflects what is (or has been) seen, heard or experienced. Film has the advantage over other media, with its ability to use visual and auditory resources, to present realism. In School Daze and Jungle Fever, Lee achieves realism in setting, dialogue, and

characterization.

In School Daze, realism emerges from the actions and dialogue of the characters, and from a camera angle. Lee places two representative groups of Aframericans opposite each other in a confrontational scene, to show how intraethnic strife plagues the Aframerican community. Da Fellas are a group of college students. They represent the formally educated segment of Aframericans. The "local yokels" are life-time residents of the economically depressed community, where Da Fellas attend college. In Uplift the Race, Lee says:

> The entire film is jammed with conflict and confrontations. . . . I remember many of my classmates looking down at and avoiding the Black lower class that lives in and around the Atlanta University Center. Their community is called "The Bottom" (Lee and Jones 1988, 177).

In the film, this separation becomes the symbol of the real-life separation that exists among some of the educated few, and the masses of Aframericans. In her comments on the scene with Da Fellas and the "local yokels," Bambara says,

> The locals are sick and tired of college boys coming on their turf every year treating them like dirt. On campus distinctions between Jigaboos and Wannabees are of no importance to the locals; all college types are Wannabees and ought to stay on campus where they belong (Bambara 1991, 54).

The physical space between the two groups in the frame further represents this disconnection. As a result, Lee presents a very real and serious issue in a few minutes, while expanding on the film's intraethnic conflict theme.

In Jungle Fever, Gator expresses the extent to which a

crack cocaine addict will go to fulfill his need for the drug. When Flipper refuses to give Gator money, he counters by saying:

> I'm gon' get high. I really hate having to resort to knocking elderly people in the head for their money. But I'll do it. [He starts to dance, and begins to sing:] I'll do it. You know I'll do it. I like gettin' high. I'm a cr' cr' cr' cr' crack head. I like gettin' high (Lee 1991).

Here, Gator relates the drug addict's reality. The National Institute on Drug Abuse says drug addicts "will do whatever is necessary to obtain" drugs (Multicultural Drug Abuse Prevention Resource Center 1977, 10). Gator's response to Flipper is not only a fact of reality for drug abusers, but it also supports his lost-man characterization in the previous chapter.

Symbolism

Symbolism occurs as a result of a person, place, object, action, or concept relating a greater meaning than its mere presence (Sheridan et al. 1965, 5-6; Roberts 1983, 100). When an artist succeeds in conveying messages with symbols, the object takes on intangible meanings that relate to the understanding of the artist's overall theme. For example:

> Literary symbols are of two broad types: one includes those embodying universal suggestions of meaning, as flowing water suggest time and eternity, a voyage suggests life; another type secures its suggestiveness not from qualities inherent in itself but from the way in which it is used in a given work (Holman and Harmon 1986, 494).

In films, characters are often shown in action, or a director

may juxtapose settings, and characters, that reveal qualities not spoken in the dialogue, to create symbolism.

In Mo' Better Blues, Lee's characterization of Shadow is an example of a symbol representing more than its visual presentation. Physically, Shadow's skin is a dark hue, and he wears black or dark clothes in almost all of his scenes. The shadow symbolism is relevant to this character's role as a member (not leader) of a band.

Shadow first appears as a faint and dark silhouette, behind Bleek who is leading the band, on stage. Throughout most of the film, Shadow is inseparable from Bleek as a key member of "The Bleek Quintet." Unlike the expected imitation or follower role of a shadow, Lee enables this shadow-like character to move beyond the confines of his caster, into a leadership role.

For example, in one scene Shadow explains to Clarke: "Anything, anyone that might overshadow him [Bleek], he blocks. Like myself. I should be the leader of this motherfucker, not Bleek. I'm getting my own shit" (Lee 1990). In this statement, Shadow alludes to his intentions to form a band. At the same time, Shadow is recognizing Bleek's leadership role, and his own as a back-up or "shadow" member of "The Bleek Quintet." This statement also alludes to Shadow's extended solo performances that Bleek allows him to play, but only after Bleek's leading performances. Therefore, in a sense, Shadow imitates Bleek. Also, in this scene the

shadow symbolism realizes its literal and visual implications. The setting is a dark nightclub. Shadow is wearing black clothes, and he indirectly states his plan to separate from "The Bleek Quintet." Roberts says, "characters in shadow or darkness may be hiding some of their motives" (Roberts 1983, 229).

As the plot begins to resolve itself, Shadow is shown leading his own band, or as an "imitation" of Bleek. In addition, this symbolic characterization alludes to the potential and the determination of Aframerican manhood. Thus, Lee takes a simple image or word, and intertwines its real meanings into Shadow's characterization. As a result, Lee shows an Aframerican male emerging from a subordinate position, to one of leadership.

In short, Lee successfully manipulates sight and sound techniques in his films. His camera shots are consistently relevant to plot, characterization, setting and other elements of filmmaking. These examples reveal various dimensions of Aframerican masculinity. Moreover, like the novelist and some other artists, the filmmaker is challenged to create a believable reality for his audience with the conventions of his medium.

# CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to illustrate how Spike Lee characterizes Aframerican men in his films. One objective has been to contrast some stereotypical characterizations of Aframerican men in films with Lee's images. This comparison confirms the study's hypothesis.

Lee renovates Aframerican male characters by connecting them to families, employment, formal education and humor that is not degrading. These characterizations convey realistic images of Aframerican life. Moreover, their presence challenges the degrading characterizations of Aframerican men by Hollywood money-mongers. Instead of perpetuating embarrassing and humiliating images of Aframerican men, Lee's characterizations attempt to reclaim masculine qualities like marriage and fatherhood.

The introduction of the tom-buck, lost-man, race-man, and comic character types is an attempt to identify contemporary images of Aframerican men in film. These newly identified character types possess humanistic qualities. The previous stereotypes (tom, coon, buck, etc.) serve only to reinforce negative perceptions, and antagonistic attitudes against Aframerican men.

Although the tom-buck and lost-man character types have less than favorable attributes in themselves, they appear opposite positive foils. For example, Dap appears in contrast to Julian/Big Brother Almighty in School Daze, and Malcolm

overshadows Bembry in X. Thus, these character types offer alternative images (negative and positive) of Aframerican men for American filmography.

Lee's filmmaking techniques also have revolutionary implications. One of these is the personification of the camera, by having characters speak directly into it (documentary style), thereby, creating the effect of an aside, but does not interrupt the film's plot. Also, the many symbols, motifs, manipulations of time, and other conventions offer a vast number of examples for the student of filmography.

Finally, the findings of this study illustrate that Aframerican men, as depicted in American films, have a variety of assumptions to challenge before suitable representations emerge. The attempts of Spike Lee and other Aframerican filmmakers are brave and necessary efforts. As such, the conclusions from this study favor James Murray's recommendations in To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Superfly: "The three goals of Black cinema are: correction of White distortions, the reflection of Black reality, and (as a propagandizing tool) the creation of a positive Black image" (Murray 1973, xiv). Thus, Lee contributes to the canon of Aframerican films which continues to unfold.

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